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MARTIN AGRONSKY: Another of the President's programs, policies, propositions that's in trouble is this whole approach of the United States now to the destabilization -- actually, to what many people regard as an effort to overturn the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua through covert operations and various other ways. And there's a growing feeling, apparently, in the Congress, again in both houses -- and, curiously, supported by many responsible Republicans -- against this particular policy.

I think it's worth quoting Representative Leach of Iowa, who on the House floor on Tuesday said this: that U.S. actions against Nicaragua undercut the moral imprimatur upon which U.S. policy in El Salvador is based. And he points out in El Salvador we stand foursquare against those who are armed and financed from abroad who'd shoot their way into power. He says in Nicaragua we stand foursquare with such forces and are, in fact, he puts it, the financers of anarchy.

Now, there's a moral contradiction in there, in a sense.

CARL ROWAN: Well, you've got two questions, one moral and one legal, here, Martin. The fundamental question -- the White House is very upset because of the leak of a document showing that the President approved actions designed to see that we don't have any more Cuba-type governments in the area.

HUGH SIDEY: Aren't you upset by publishing a document like that?

ROWAN: No, I'm not upset about publishing the document. Not one whit.

Now, you've got the fundamental moral question where you go around preaching about not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, you rail against what the Soviets do in Afghanistan and Poland; do we then say that we have the right to determine the politics of every government in Central America and South America? If we do, that is a very serious policy to undertake.

Secondly, the Congress, in the appropriations bill for this fiscal year, said there must be no support of actions designed to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

AGRONSKY: That became the Boland Amendment.

ROWAN: Well, you've got a lot of senators on the Intelligence Committee who say they believe the Administration is violating the law. You've got legality and you've got international morality. And those are the issues.

SIDEY: What isn't moral, Carl? I'd like you to answer that question. Is it moral just to sit here and watch this happen down there? What would you do?

ROWAN: Well, let me say this. Do you think...

SIDEY: Just ignore it?

ROWAN: ...you have the right to say to the people in Country X, "You don't have the right to overthrow an oligarchy because you live close to me"?

SIDEY: That's not what happened.

ROWAN: Well, that this happened.

SIDEY: There isn't a bit of proof on that. The fact of the matter, are we unable to support people in any of these ways that ask our support?

ROWAN: Supporting a country, supporting people is one thing. Deliberately trying to overthrow the government of another country...

SIDEY: That hasn't been proved.

ROWAN: ...you don't like is precisely what the Soviets do.

AGRONSKY: Well, the members of the Congress who are objecting to this policy feel that this is the direction in which our policy is moving, and they resent it. And you may say they

haven't documented it yet, but I can't believe that responsible congressmen would make these criticisms unless they had some reason to arrive at it.

SIDEY: But the Congress has also granted them the authority in covert actions to try to interdict arms from Cuba into these other nations.

ELIZABETH DREW: Whether or not it has been -- the Boland Amendment has been legally violated, I think, is going to be very difficult to get at. And it engages everybody in a good bit of sophistry. I think the complaint is whether or not it has been violated in spirit.

But you talk about morality and legality. I'd like to add another consideration, which is practicality. I accept that it's an ugly world. I accept that there are some unpleasant things we may have to do in some areas. I even accept the idea of covert action. But I would also suggest that we be very practical about it and think about it.

AGRONSKY: You mean, does it work?

DREW: Is it likely to stay covert? Answer on this one: apparently no. What are the con -- is it going to work? What are the consequences going to be, near-term or long-term? And I think the final comment, probably, on what's going on in Nicaragua was said by Mr. Pastore, Commandante Pastore, who is one of the centrists who has been forced to leave the country. And he said, "I don't understand what's going on. The Sandinistas are doing everything to get themselves overthrown, and the CIA is doing everything to keep them in power."

GEORGE WILL: Well, the Sandinistas have set up a Stalinist dictatorship and they've said, "We have passed through" -- you may not have noticed it. It's like driving through a very small town very fast -- "We have passed through the elections stage of our democratic revolution."

So, they're going to get people trying to shoot back at them. And I think that if they get overthrown, that would certainly be a blessing to the hemisphere.

But there's a curious -- you want to talk about morality and consistency in argument. When the left tries to shoot its way into power, starts shooting in El Salvador, people say, "Wait. We must have six elections, and then we must negotiate and share power." That's what the world opinion is. Now I would like to hear world opinion, so-called, now say to the Sandinistas, "Well, you obviously have a disaffected minority," maybe a disaffected majority. "You'd better have some elections

and share power." Let's hear that from the United Nations.

AGRONSKY: Well, let's hear it from the United States. No one would object to that. Why do you raise it, George? You mean you think it's impossible for us to do that?

WILL: We are constantly urging the Sandinistas to have elections, as they promised to do. Let's hear the United Nations pause in its sanctimony long enough to say that.

ROWAN: The simple reality -- and it has nothing to do with sanctimony -- is that if you live in a hemisphere where you are dealing with people you know have been cheated, abused, had their noses rubbed in the dirt, left in squalor for years, you cannot control those people simply by giving a batch of arms to a bunch of people, many -- let me finish -- many of whom are killers who have no respect for human rights. In the short term, it won't work. And in the long term, it will be disastrous.

SIDEY: But if you read the memorandum that came from the secret meetings, more of it was devoted to trying to bring about political reform, to get economic aid in there, to improve trade, to improve their conditions, than was devoted to the matter of military affairs.

WILL: And I seem to detect in what you're saying, Carl, the premise that the Sandinista regime reflects the will of the Nicaraguan people, a will they are not willing to test in elections.

ROWAN: I don't know where you detect that in what I said, at all.

DREW: Or in what I said. They're a very unpopular regime. They have a lot of problems. But this is likely to backfire and make them stronger.